

## Durham Research Online

---

### Deposited in DRO:

05 August 2016

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Leante, Laura (2009) 'Urban Myth : bhangra and the dhol craze in the UK.', in Music in motion : diversity and dialogue in Europe. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, pp. 191-207.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-1074-1/>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 License.

### Additional information:

---

### Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

## “Urban myth”: *bhangra* and the *dhol* craze in the UK

*Bhangra* is believed to have originated in western Punjab (in today's Pakistan) as a rural male dance performed to the rhythm of the *dhol*, a large double-headed barrel drum, to celebrate the spring harvest. Soon after Indian Partition in 1947 and following the social upheaval which accompanied it, a dance called *bhangra* became associated to the new Indian Punjab's cultural identity. This phenomenon was encouraged and supported from the outset by the local administration and can be attributed to two main factors. On the one hand, since the first half of the 1950s the image of *bhangra* as a symbol of Punjabi identity was spread outside Punjab by teams of *bhangra* dancers featured in national and international events (such as the Republic Day Parade in Delhi) and in Bollywood movies<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, what cemented this association among Punjabis and marked the institutionalisation of *bhangra* was the participation of dance teams in inter-college and inter-university youth festivals and competitions, which became more and more common from the 1960s, with the foundation of Punjab's first higher education institutions. To this day, schools and colleges are the places where young Punjabis learn to dance *bhangra*.

Within a short time, therefore, *bhangra* was established in the urban context, the rural dance being destined to become a nostalgic memory for the few who could claim to have witnessed it, as well as the ideal reference for the homonymous urban stage dance. The newer urban dance, which is still accompanied by a *dhol* player, is performed by teams of approximately ten to twelve dancers in costume, who present choreographies put together – following the competitions' guidelines and rules – by a coach (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

The vast majority of Punjabis who left India – especially from the late Fifties, in the post-Second World War migratory waves – and brought their knowledge of *bhangra* to the UK had seen it or danced it in its urban form, and their acquaintance with it dates back to their own or some friend's or relative's schooldays in Punjab. Therefore, although most dancers will talk about *bhangra* as a traditional village dance performed for the harvest, as a matter of fact, what they have experienced directly is the staged performance which has become consolidated in the past few decades.

**Figure 1:** Punjabi students performing *bhangra* (Guru Nanak College, Phagwara – Punjab, November 2004)

However, the form of *bhangra* which is nowadays more in the public eye in the West – often attracting the attention of the non-South Asian mainstream media – is different again: a popular music genre which spread during the 1980s among the communities outside India, where it

---

<sup>1</sup> In 1954 the Maharaja of Patiala sponsored a team of Punjabi dancers to perform at the parade held in Delhi on Republic Day. The leader of the team, Manohar Deepak, took his group to Mumbai and in 1956 *bhangra* made its first appearance in Bollywood movies such as *Jagte Raho* and, a few months later, *Naya Daur* (see also Schreffler 2002, 20 and Ballantyne 2007, 128-129).

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the *dhol*, other instruments can be used to accompany *bhangra* teams, including the percussion *chimta*, the one-stringed lute *toombi*, and the double flute *algoza*. The dancers also use two kinds of wooden clappers during the performance: the lattice-shaped *sapp*, and the squirrel-shaped *katto*. A singer can also perform in the background.

established itself as the means for immigrants – especially the second-generation youth – to assert a modern Punjabi diasporic identity (Leante 2003 and 2004)<sup>3</sup>.

This pop-influenced *bhangra*, which also claims direct descent from the rural dance, is actually a sung genre intended for dancing, which owes as much to Punjabi popular and folk singing as it does to dance<sup>4</sup>. (It is no accident, I believe, that two of the first and most influential *bhangra* stars in the UK – singers Channi Singh and Malkit Singh – were known in their schooldays in Punjab for their vocal skills, and never joined a dance team). This genre of *bhangra* is danced by individuals, both male and female, and the choreographed dance (considered “more traditional”) is referenced only by a handful of moves, performed at the discretion of the participants. Jokes about these stereotyped movements abound, and make some senior members of *bhangra* teams knit their eyebrows indignantly, remarking that the complexity and intricacy of the dance cannot be reduced to a few moves mimicking, for example, the act of “screwing in a light bulb” or “stepping on a cigarette end”. The real celebrities of this modern genre are singers and DJs, who have nourished a rich record market for the past three decades. Many of these artists produce, promote, and perform their music in both the UK and India, fostering that international web within which *bhangra* proliferates.

Both the modern pop *bhangra* and the choreographed stage dance are regularly and easily accessible in the communities of the Punjabi diaspora in the UK, where one can always find posters in the streets and in shops advertising forthcoming shows, disco events<sup>5</sup>, or *melas* (fairs)<sup>6</sup>. Other occasions of performance include annual celebrations, the biggest being the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi, which usually features (especially for its association to the Indian harvest happening in the same season, and therefore to *bhangra*) teams of dancers who follow the religious processions, either performing to the sound of a *dhhol* played live, or to a pre-recorded, often heavily pop-influenced track. In fact it is not uncommon for a team of dancers to choreograph a performance to some *bhangra* pop hit, and this reveals how the two modern forms of *bhangra* do not belong to mutually exclusive scenes, but, on the contrary, often intersect.

The establishment of groups of *bhangra* dancers in the UK preceded the spread of the modern pop-influenced form. In fact, a few teams were already performing in the late Sixties, made up of immigrants who had learned or seen the dance back in their days in Punjab. Some of the younger generation, in contrast, have experienced *bhangra* exclusively in Britain – although today’s

---

<sup>3</sup> Roughly at the same time the modern pop-influenced *bhangra* emerged in Britain, an analogous form of music started to spread in Punjab. It is not possible to talk about the first without taking the second into account, as the two scenes are part of the same web of music production. Much could also be said about the osmotic relationship between this modern *bhangra* and Bollywood music; the topic, nevertheless, falls beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of clarity, in the next few pages, whenever possible, I will refer to choreographed *bhangra* dancers as “*bhangra* teams”, and to the artists and musicians of the modern western pop-influenced genre as “*bhangra* bands”.

<sup>5</sup> See also Banerji and Baumann 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, in the UK, contrarily to India and other countries, there are no *bhangra* competitions. Occasionally British teams try to raise funds to participate in contests abroad – especially the U.S. or Canada – where these events are widespread and regular. When in January 2008 a widely advertised International *bhangra* competition took place in Punjab, only one British-based team showed interest in participating. Not having been able to find a sponsor to support the travel expenses for the whole group, only two members of the team went to India just to attend the event. (Jag Kumar, informal communication – Jalandhar, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2008)

communication technology allows Punjabis around the world to easily share a lot of their culture. Nevertheless, until a few years ago, in the absence of established teachers, those who wanted to learn often had to teach themselves, imitating the music and dance being played and performed at weddings or parties, or watching Indian movies and TV programmes. Jag Kumar, of the Nachda Sansaar team from Birmingham, told me how, as a teenager in the early Eighties, he started getting into *bhangra* when – with a group of friends – he decided to put together a dance routine to music by London-based band Alaap in order to enliven a school assembly:

We didn't have a teacher to teach us, we were picking up movements and we were probably adding our little twist to the movements. We started looking at old videos from India – movies. And at that time there used to be a programme called “New Way New Life” [*Nai Zindagi Naya Jeevan*], just specifically for Indians [...] we watched things like that. (Jag Kumar, personal communication – Birmingham, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008)

In a few months, Jag joined a team, started wearing a *bhangra* costume during his performances, and began to ask more senior dancers and *dhhol* players for advice, since by this time he and his friends were committed to dancing *bhangra* “in the right way” (ibid.). Stories similar to Jag Kumar's could no doubt have been told by many of his contemporaries.

Nowadays most *bhangra* learners are second or third generation British Punjabis, who sometimes – like Jag – develop an interest in *bhangra* in their teens, while also being into Western popular music; for them, though, the learning path is more straightforward, as they can easily join one of the numerous teams (one being Jag's own) which provide classes at all levels. Those who are more into the modern pop-influenced form of *bhangra* than the choreographed dance join or start a band with their friends; many others, finally, are stirred by the sound of the *dhhol* and decide to learn to play this drum – a phenomenon to which I will now turn.

### The UK *dhhol* craze

So far I have discussed how “*bhangra*” refers to different forms or genres: a rural dance, a choreographed dance performed in urban Punjab and in the diaspora, and a Western pop-influenced genre which spread in the 1980s. Especially in the wake of the huge popularity of the latter, many people, in particular outside India, started referring to Punjabi pop in general and even to other forms of dance-oriented South Asian popular music as “*bhangra*” (see also Schreffler 2002, 17-18). No wonder, then, that such indeterminacy of definition can make it difficult to shed light, for example, on the first developments of the pop-influenced form of *bhangra* in the UK between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s: in this period, in fact, teams performing the choreographed dance were popular in the Punjabi communities alongside folk singers, and both genres are nowadays often labelled as “*bhangra*”<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, what they seem to have in common is a certain character of “danceability”, which can be associated to the *dhhol* and/or to a set of rhythms derived from the choreographed dance, especially the distinctive eight-beat swung trochaic pattern called *kaharva*. This rhythm and the *dhhol* have come to signify *bhangra par excellence*. In the UK in particular, not only has the *dhhol* become a symbol of *bhangra*, but it has equalled it in representing Punjabi identity. Here, a real craze has developed for the last fifteen years in a unique way, so far

---

<sup>7</sup> An example, in this sense, is *Teri Chunni de Sitare*, the first album published by the group Alaap, often considered the pioneer UK-*bhangra* record (see also Schreffler 2002, 4 – note 6).

unparalleled in other communities of the Punjabi diaspora, which entailed a change in the social status of this instrument and its players compared to the original Indian context.

Traditionally, *dholis* (dhol players) in Punjab – like most other drummers in South Asia – belong to communities of professional male players from low caste social groups<sup>8</sup>. Apart from very few exceptions, *dhol* playing is not sought after as a profession by young boys from outside drummers' communities, while many of these boys do aspire to join their school or college's *bhangra* team as dancers – an activity which will grant them visibility among their peers and which will often give lustre to their institution. In Britain, on the contrary, children of all ages long to pick up the *dhol* and to play the eight-beat *kaharna* rhythm. Here social class and gender issues seem not to be an obstacle, as both boys and girls from different social backgrounds want to play the *dhol* (Poole 2004, 20-23). The occasions for performance are numerous, and range from the private sphere – on the occasion of parties – to the public space. At processions – such as those held for the annual celebration of Vaisakhi – line-ups of young *dhol* players (fig. 2) usually follow at the end of the column, alongside teams of *bhangra* dancers, often wearing a T-shirt with the name or logo of their team while parading their skills.

**Figure 2:** Young British Punjabis playing the *dhol* during the Vaisakhi procession (Southall – London, April 2006)

In recent years the number of *dhol* teachers has been rapidly increasing within Punjabi communities in Britain. Local music shops and community centres provide lists and contacts of *dholis*, or offer on-site tuition. Most importantly, some players with a stronger entrepreneurial inclination have founded large groups offering classes for different levels and ages and at the same time providing a number of more experienced *dholis* for hire to perform at a range of events, including parties, *melas*, and disco gigs. The Dhol Foundation, the Ministry of Dhol, the Dhol Academy, and the Dhol Blasters are only a few of the best-known names. Some of them are twinned, within the same organization, with *bhangra* teams of the same name and the activities of the most resourceful include the promotion of workshops on both the dance and the *dhol* among schools outside the South Asian communities in various locations in the UK.

This interest has started to create a growing market also for the drum itself. One of the largest Indian musical instruments retailers in the UK, London-based Bina Musicals, for example, have significantly increased the trade of their *dhols* in the past fifteen years. They told me that sometimes they sell “even five or six” *dhols* in a week. Their drums – advertised on their website as “*bhangra dhols*” – are all manufactured in India (in different designs and sizes<sup>9</sup>) and imported from the main family shop in New Delhi<sup>10</sup>.

Most interestingly, *dhol* playing has developed as integral to and at the same time separate from *bhangra* bands or dance teams: in fact, as well as playing for *bhangra* dancers, more skilled *dholis* can join bands in which they are often the main attraction, supported by a group of other musicians

---

<sup>8</sup> For more information about *dholi* communities, see Schreffler 2002, 2002-3 and 2005b. To this day, the vast majority of *dholis* come from these social classes, although a few young men from outside these communities are starting to show interest in the instrument – an interest which is often due to its association with *bhangra*.

<sup>9</sup> Further reference to organological issues will be made in the next pages.

<sup>10</sup> Manu Sura, informal communication – London, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2008. See also Bina Musicals' website ([www.binaswar.com](http://www.binaswar.com)) and the website of another major London-based retailer, Jas Musicals ([www.jas-musicals.com](http://www.jas-musicals.com)).

(playing, for example, guitars, basses, drum kits, or keyboards). These bands have sometimes enjoyed exposure even among non-South Asian audiences, and have contributed significantly to the professionalization and to the raising of the status of *dbol* playing in the UK. This somehow subverts the conception of the role of the *dholi* in Punjab, who belongs to specific low caste social groups and has a relatively low status.

How does the UK *dbol* craze relate to the traditional position of *dbol* playing in India? How do UK-based musicians articulate these differences? One of the things that I found most striking when I started discussing this shift of status with UK-based *dbolis*, *bhangra* dancers, producers and players was their lukewarm reaction. In fact, they would not raise the topic unless I did so, but would then proudly mention the popularity of *dbol* playing in Britain across gender and class distribution and its significance as a sign of social equality; they would not usually refer to how this could be seen, for instance, in India. However, in Punjab, UK-based *dbol* players are considered *amateurs* rather than “real” professional players faithful to the tradition. The fact that they do not learn from a “proper” teacher belonging to *dholi* communities is negatively valued, and the style of playing of these “half-baked” UK *dbolis* is often described as lacking the subtleties or nuances of the expert players, as well as the full mastery of the instrument and its repertoires.

The apparent indifference of UK-based Punjabis towards these issues may seem quite peculiar, especially when we consider that, through the equation “*dbol* = *bhangra* = Punjabiness”, this drum is a direct referent to India and to Punjabi tradition. Nevertheless, the paradox is resolved once one realises that as long as the *dbol* is perceived as an index of Punjab and its culture, it does not really matter whether the style of playing or the status of the player are the same as those in India. In fact, the *dbol* addresses not so much Punjab *per se*, but Punjab as an ideal projection, i.e. Punjab as perceived by UK-based Punjabis.

India and Punjab emerge as essential aspects in shaping identity, but this identity is ultimately “British Punjabi” and references the social reality of the community of diaspora in the UK. Therefore, this identity is asserted through a double process entailing both ideal proximity to India (by addressing the Punjabi origin) and distance from it (as a result of the experience of the life in the West). This process also contributes to Punjab’s accession to a sort of mythical status, which emerges, for example, from the fascination mingled with vagueness with which many talk about *bhangra*’s origin as a village dance, and about the jollity of the harvest, and – of course – of the *dbol*.

Therefore, the key to studying the *dbol* craze in the UK is to look beyond its reference to India and to consider it also as a phenomenon establishing a sort of parallel, new tradition. In order to understand the character of this tradition, it will be necessary to take a few steps back and try to shed some light on its developments through the past few decades. At this point, though, the reader will not be surprised to discover that the early days of the *dbol* in Britain are shrouded in a certain haziness, as the emphasis tends to be more on today’s UK-based stars than on who brought the *dbol* to Britain and when and how they started playing it.

However, it seems that the first UK *dbol* players didn’t belong to traditional *dholi* communities, who were probably too financially disadvantaged to be able to afford, at least at that time, the cost of travelling outside India<sup>11</sup>. On the contrary, it seems these immigrants got to know about *dbol* playing from the drummers who accompanied their college’s *bhangra* team back in their school days in India. In general, these first *dbolis* either kept a relatively low profile, or anyway never reached the status of celebrities which some of the younger drummers have enjoyed for the past twenty years.

---

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to Gibb Schreffler for his input on this subject.

Harbinder Singh, the *dholi* of the Great Indian Dancers – one of the first *bhangra* teams based in the West-London neighbourhood of Southall – was one of the few *dholis* of his generation to achieve public exposure in Britain, especially after the Great Indian Dancers were recruited to feature in a movie<sup>12</sup>. Harbinder – who had been a *bhangra* dancer in his college team in Jalandhar – settled in the UK in 1964, and only later resolved on playing the *dhhol*, after seeing Amritsar-based renowned *dhhol* master Ustad Harbans Lal accompany Punjabi singer K. Deep touring Britain. Harbinder decided then to go back to India and spend some time there to learn from Harbans Lal<sup>13</sup>. This kind of learning path is quite unusual and definitely not the first choice for the following generations of drummers in Britain: young *dhhol* players do not usually take up this option, as they are already catered for by a growing number of UK-based *dhholis* who can satisfy their needs. I would suggest that there would be little point in these youngsters going abroad in any case, as what they want to learn is actually the *dhhol* as it is played in the UK. To fully understand this craze one should also take into account two more aspects: first, especially for the young and teenage boys and girls, joining a team of *dhhol* players affords a possibility to socialise and have fun with their peers. Secondly, one cannot overestimate the fascination of those *dhholis* who have recently ascended to the status of popular stars, nourishing, as a result, the desires and ambitions of the younger generation to emulate their idols.

The emergence of these stars has surely had an impact on the development of a new youth culture associated to the *dhhol* craze in the UK. Two players who can be considered emblematic in this sense are Gurcharan Mall and Johnny Kalsi – founders and leaders of two of the most established *dhhol* teams in the UK: respectively, The Dhol Blasters and The Dhol Foundation.

Gurcharan Mall, now in his fifties, moved to Birmingham from Punjab with his parents in the early 1960s. Here he first started to play the *dhholak* (a double headed barrel drum smaller than the *dhhol*) accompanying singers in the local temple, and then got into the *dhhol*. During a recent interview, he explained to me how, like many of his contemporaries – and in a way similar to many UK-based *bhangra* dancers – he was mostly a self taught musician:

My first instrument was the *dhholak* [...] Everybody who started in music in olden days [...] they just watched films and picked things up [...] because in those days there was no one to teach us. [...] Before I picked up the *dhhol* there was five or six [*bhangra*] teams. Some of them [the *dhholis* of those teams] even went back [to learn *dhhol*] [...]

When you join a team, then you start to learn things [...] When I started I wanted to make a progress and then this friend of mine was a *dholi* in [a *bhangra* team] and I said to him “Look, I wanna come along” [...] He learnt the same way that I learnt (Gurcharan Mall, personal communication – Birmingham, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2008).

It is interesting how the musician refers to some of the *dhholis* who were active in the UK before him as to those who “*even went back*” to Punjab to learn the *dhhol*: in Gurcharan Mall’s words one can find the legitimisation of the UK *dhhol* playing through a connection to the Punjabi playing tradition, while at the same time stepping back from that same lineage.

---

<sup>12</sup> Kuljit Bhamra, personal communication – London, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Harbinder Singh, informal telephone communication – 28<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

This process of distancing was somehow completed in the past fifteen years or so by Johnny Kalsi, born in the UK from parents whose families had originally left India to settle in Kenya. A third generation emigrant, Johnny was brought up in the suburban areas of West of London, and never visited his ancestors' village in Punjab<sup>14</sup>. Although he claims to have been fascinated by Indian percussion instruments (especially *tabla* and *dhholak*) since he was a child, he started playing with dedication and commitment as a teenager, when he learnt the Western drum kit and used to play it at his school's events and assemblies. The first opportunity to play a *dhhol* arose through an uncle, who had brought his drum from India and who, in turn, had learned from the *dhholi* who accompanied the *bhangra* team of his college in Punjab (evidently, following the same path which I have described above).

Johnny's career as a *dhhol* player was propelled when he joined *bhangra* band Alaap; after establishing his popularity with them, Johnny moved on to what would become a solo career with his Dhol Foundation. Unlike most British *bhangra* singers and *dhhol* players, Johnny managed to enjoy a certain degree of exposure also on the Western mainstream circuit, securing a deal with Real World. His look is very different from Gurcharan Mall's more traditional *bhangra* outfit, and addresses a more contemporary, Western-influenced British Asian youth. Most of all, he focuses on his image as a *dhhol* soloist: his shows are built around him and a group of drum players. When we met, Johnny was keen to stress how he made enquiries and did "his research"<sup>15</sup> to find out about the "real Punjabi tradition" and about the *dhhol*. Significantly, though, according to Johnny, this research ultimately led him to think of some changes to make on his drum in order to obtain a *new* sound that would please him more.

### The "origin" of a new tradition

The diffusion of *dhhol* playing in the UK is also responsible for the development of a modern model of the instrument, in which the high-pitched goat skin is replaced by a plastic membrane, held by metal hooks which are screwed in the body of the drum, while the rope remains the means of tension for the low-pitch skin.<sup>16</sup> This new model has become extremely common both in the UK and abroad, including India, where nowadays most *dhhol*s are manufactured with the plastic head (Schreffler 2005a). This innovation seems to have been introduced as a result of the encounter with Western drum kit playing and is attributed to and claimed by Johnny Kalsi.

In the previous pages I have discussed how both *bhangra* and the *dhhol* craze developed in the UK as a phenomenon characterised at the same time by ideal proximity to and distance from India: they claim in fact descent from Punjabi tradition, while at the same time revealing characteristics and innovations derived from the experience of life in the UK. The *dhhol*, in particular, has acquired a new status compared to that it is accorded in Punjab, and it seems to have taken a new direction to the extent that it is often not valued or appreciated by more orthodox and senior *bhangra* dancers and *dhholis* in India.

---

<sup>14</sup> Johnny Kalsi, personal communication – Feltham, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

<sup>15</sup> The theme of "research" on Punjabi musical tradition is quite common in conversations, especially with second generation British born Asians (Johnny Kalsi, personal communication – Feltham, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2008; Jag Kumar, personal communication – Birmingham, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008).

<sup>16</sup> In figure 2, the first two *dhhol*s from the left feature a (dark) plastic head held by metal hooks. The goat skin tightened by a rope is visible in the *dhhol* in the foreground on the right.



To me, what confirms the parting of the UK *dbhol* craze from the Punjabi drumming tradition is Johnny Kalsi's description – which he gave me during a recent interview – of how he introduced his changes to his *dbhol*, namely a straight shape and the plastic head<sup>17</sup>. I think Johnny's narration can provide interesting perspectives on the analysis not only of the *dbhol* craze in Britain, but also of its relationship with Punjab and of what I previously introduced as a sort of “mythical” status acquired by the latter. For this reason, I will quote him at length:

I had a friend who was at college – a Pakistani guy, also Punjabi, and I took a trip with him [to] Lahore<sup>18</sup>. I wanted to find somebody to make me one [a drum] in the shape that I wanted. This was the birth of the new hybrid dhol drum, [in the] early Eighties. [It was] almost like an expedition – [from] Lahore [to] Jammu. [We] Took the trip on the train, found a mill – ‘cause taahli was the wood that I needed. Now, [in] Jammu there's a forest, and next to the forest there's mill, but it's government protected. It's right next to Kashmir, the place is almost a warzone. You can go there, but you have to have people with you. I had to bribe lots of people with my friend. And we bribed the security, we bribed the millworkers, we bribed the people that de-barked the wood, we bribed the person that had to get [it] on the cart to bring it down. I must have spent maybe ten thousand rupees. Came down to Lahore, and then I found a mill worker. He said: “I'll make a dhol for you” and I said “alright, fine, no problem”. The wood arrived, he put it on a lathe and he started carving. He [had] never made a dhol in his life, but I found out afterwards. [He] cut the wood, put it on the lathe, and he put a tool at one end. Don't forget, trees don't grow perfectly straight; they have to be made straight, right? So, started turning it, and mounted a tool with a point on one side to hold the thing. Eventually you end up with a straight piece of wood. Perfect. Then he mounts a very sharp blade. He winds in, as the thing is going around, and he cuts through. Then he turns the things around and he does the other side, then he takes it off and the middle falls out, and he goes “this is the start of your dhol” and I go “wow, this is amazing” and I look at the middle bit and [say:] “this is mine as well”, and he goes “no, - says - that's mine”. I said “what are you going to do with that?” He said “I'm gonna make dholaks and tablas”. I completely got ripped off. It was my piece of wood, but he kept it. So, this argument went on [until I] let him have it, but we made a deal, so he would lessen the price of his machinery [and] his days of working. And then, on the last part of the drum he allowed me to work the machine and cut the grooves on my drum. I did all the grooves myself. And there was one more bribe on the way back from Pakistan: the security at the airport. They said “this is an instrument”. We went: “no, this is a plant pot. We're going to fill it with mud and plant a tree”. [We] got away with it. Brought it back, and when I got it back then I drilled the holes, took the hooks off my old drum, and put it on the new

---

<sup>17</sup> Although the body of the Punjabi *dbhol* is curved, straight *dbhols* are common in other areas of India.

<sup>18</sup> The fact that Johnny Kalsi had a Pakistani Punjabi school friend is also a result of his experience of the life in the diaspora. The reason why he went to Pakistan with his friend and not to India was – however – not discussed in our conversation.

one, and then mounted the rope, and the sound was unbelievable (Johnny Kalsi, personal communication – Feltham, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2008).<sup>19</sup>

Several details in Johnny's story are consistent with the description of *dhhol* making in Punjab provided by Gibb Schreffler (2005). According to Schreffler, in fact, the majority of *dhhol*s marketed in Punjab are made from *taabli* (Indian rosewood) or mango trees, both common in Northern India. The woods come from the forests in Uttar Pradesh and are initially carved by craftsmen in the same region<sup>20</sup> using a lathe and a flat wedge-shaped blade like those employed by the novice instrument maker/mill worker in Lahore for Johnny Kalsi. Similarly, it is usual practice to use the wood remnant after the *dhhol* shell has been carved to make *dhholaks* and *tablas* (Schreffler, *ibid.*).

However, what struck me in Johnny's story was not so much the content, but rather the narrative strategy which he adopted. What was presented to me was in fact a sort of "myth of origin" not only of the "new hybrid *dhhol*", as he calls it – the one with the high pitch plastic head – but also of the "modern *dhhol* drumming tradition" so popular nowadays among Punjabis in the UK<sup>21</sup>. (While listening to his narration I couldn't help figuring him as a sort of Prometheus taking [stealing] the *dhhol* [fire] from South Asia [Olympus] to bring it to Britain and give it to British Asians [Mankind] to start a new musical tradition.)

It is not my intention to doubt the factuality of the events as described. However, I suggest that applying a metaphorical reading to the story can unveil more stimulating interpretations. For instance, the fact that the millworker who carved the drum had never made a *dhhol* before can be seen as a way to reinforce further Johnny's process of distancing himself from the existing *dhhol* drumming tradition in Punjab.

Moreover, if we take the story as a whole, at a macroscopic level one can easily identify the two main geographic locations in which Johnny's *dhhol* is crafted – Lahore and UK – with what Jurij Lotman would have defined as textual *topoi* (i.e. narrative spaces defining a semantic continuum); these *topoi* are charged with clearly distinct semantic relations – respectively, western Punjab (in which *bhangra* is believed to have originated) and modern-day communities of the Punjabi diaspora. As the protagonist, Johnny is the figure which moves across the *topoi*'s borders, brings the story forward, and acts as *trait d'union* of the two cultures, bridging the gaps between them (Lotman 1977).

He emerges thus as the hero-agent who, together with his helper-friend, has to accomplish a number of tasks, including travelling to Jammu (another *topos*) in spite of the dangers in the area, bribing the people working at the mill ("custodians" of the *taabli* wood), enduring the requests of the ambiguous helper/mill worker in Lahore, and - finally - sagaciously devise a way (this time bribery needs to be accompanied by the trick of the plant pot) in order to cross the last border (in this case, a physical one) before reaching Britain.

The narration makes recourse to several stylistic features typical of oral narratives, the most striking probably being repetition ("we bribed the security, we bribed the millworkers, we bribed the person that de-barked the wood, we bribed the person that had to get [it] on the cart") and the

---

<sup>19</sup> In order to facilitate the reading of this quotation, the ellipses were omitted from the text.

<sup>20</sup> Schreffler mentions one town in particular, Amroha: "Amroha is a sort of 'Dholak City'; in certain areas, everywhere you look people are working on some stage of the manufacture of *dhholaks* (many more *dhholaks* are made than *dhhol*s, for obvious reasons). If you see a *dhhol* in a shop in Punjab, it has more than likely come from Amroha" (Schreffler 2005).

<sup>21</sup> A shorter version of the story was written by Johnny Kalsi himself for his blog (Kalsi 2006). This version, though, omits many of the details present in the interview quoted in this article and does not present some of the stylistic features – more common in oral narratives – which made me first think of this story as a sort of "myth".

positioning of places and actions in a hazy spatial<sup>22</sup> and temporal dimension. In particular, although a rough time reference is given (the trip to Pakistan is said to have taken place “in the Eighties”), the chronological succession of the events is not informed with their temporal scale: for instance, the stages of wood cutting and carving are described with no reference to the length of the processes, which can take up to several weeks (Schreffler 2005). This contributes to the projection of the narration onto a timeless space, and thus to envelope it with a mythical aura<sup>23</sup>. In other words, Johnny Kalsi’s story presents that “double structure, altogether historical and ahistorical” which – according to Lévi-Strauss – characterises myth (Lévi-Strauss 1968, 209-210). Most importantly, if “mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution” (ibid, 224), then this story emerges as a possible explanation – and can be said to resolve – the controversial relationship between the *dhhol* tradition in Punjab and the recent craze in the UK: in fact, while still acknowledging the South Asian descent of his drum (again, the drum standing for a whole tradition), Johnny backs away from it, by describing how his *dhhol* was carved out of *taabli* wood in Punjab, but was actually equipped with the new features and completed in the UK.

If Johnny Kalsi’s story can be read as a myth of the origin of the modern *dhhol* and of the UK *dhhol* craze, then, at the same time, India emerges as a mythical place. It is no accident, I believe, that many British Punjabi children, as soon as they hear that some elder relative or friend is going to Punjab, ask them to bring back as a present for them a *dhhol* – which of course in the vast majority of cases does not happen, the size and weight of the instrument and the airlines’ luggage fees being among the most obvious deterrents. Most interestingly, though, the drum they would be most likely to receive would not be different from one of those they can easily buy a few hundred yards from their homes in Britain in one of the music shops which import them from India at quite reasonable prices. Again, the value of the *dhhol* they long to have is not so much in the instrument *per se*, but in its symbolic connection to India.

## Conclusions

Elsewhere I have argued that the key to understanding how British Asian identity is expressed and asserted through music is to be sought in the ambiguity between “self” and “other”, between what is perceived as “familiar” or “alien”, which permeates the life of UK-based Punjabis, who are exposed to both South Asian and Western culture (Leante 2004). Moreover one must bear in mind that a similar ambiguity characterises the relationship of British Punjabis with India: Punjab, in fact, is an essential reference in claiming cultural descent and separation. It is the convergence and concurrence of proximity to and distance from India which shape both *bhangra* and *dhhol* playing in the UK. The way in which each individual positions himself with respect to these dynamics of proximity and distance depends on his or her own experience: I have illustrated how different first, second, or third generation emigrants got to know and became involved in Punjabi music and dance in Britain. Without wishing to risk simplistic generalizations, though, it could be argued that by affirming its link with Indian tradition, *bhangra* (especially the choreographed dance) virtually brings Punjab “here and now” into the community of diaspora, among British Punjabis; by stepping back from that same tradition, it legitimises new developments in music and playing styles, which unveil more explicitly the experience of life in the diaspora.

---

<sup>22</sup> “[in] Jammu there’s a forest, and next to the forest there’s mill” (Johnny Kalsi, personal communication – Feltham, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2008).

<sup>23</sup> “what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless” (Lévi-Strauss 1968, 209).

*Dhol* playing in the UK has recently developed as a new phenomenon, parallel and autonomous to the tradition in Punjab to the extent that the diffusion of new model of the drum (apparently resulting from the encounter with Western drum kit playing) is ascribed to UK-based players. The British *dhol* craze – heavily frowned upon by *dhols* in India – has established itself as a phenomenon based on a new social background and has nourished a pop-like star-system which attracts many young Punjabis in the diaspora. This seems to have been facilitated from the beginning by distance from Punjab (in physical as well as figurative terms) and, at the same time, by close association to *bhangra* (both in its popular music incarnation and as a choreographed dance) and – by means of that – to Punjabi tradition. India emerges ultimately as a mythical place, longed-for but essentially distant. Nevertheless, it remains an essential reference addressed as the result of an ideal projection, a necessary aspect in shaping and asserting identity, although this identity is actually “British Punjabi” and references the experience of the diaspora in the UK.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the friends and artists – both in the UK and Punjab – who contributed to the research at the basis of this chapter, and in particular Kuljit Bhamra, Johnny Kalsi of the Dhol Foundation, Jag Kumar, Gurcharan Mall, Alessia Ronchetti, Gibb Schreffler, Harbinder Singh, Inderjit Singh, Manu Sura of Bina Musicals. I am also grateful to Martin Clayton and Patrick Froelicher for their comments on an early draft of this essay.

Part of the background research and contacts pursued for this work were made during fieldwork in India sponsored by the British Academy (SG-48477).

### Referenecs

Ballantyne, Tony. 2007. *Between colonialism and diaspora: Sikh cultural formations in an imperial world*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Banerji, Sabita, and Gerd Baumann. 1990. Bhangra 1984-8: Fusion and Professionalization in a Genre of South Asian Dance and Music. In *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music*, ed. Paul Oliver, 137-52. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Kalsi, Johnny. 2006. *The Start of the Dhol in One life of Johnny Kalsi*. <http://blog.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.view&friendID=84832389&blogID=174721276> (accessed June 23, 2008).

Leante, Laura. 2003. *Le British Asian musics. Processi di ri-significazione nell'incontro tra tradizione Indiana e popular music*. PhD diss., Università di Roma “La Sapienza”.

Leante, Laura. 2004. *Shaping Diasporic Sounds: Identity as Meaning in Bhangra*. *The World of Music* 46 (1): 109-132.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1968 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1963]. *Structural Anthropology*. London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press.

Lotman, Jurij. 1977. *The structure of the artistic text*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

Poole, Adrian. 2004. *South Asian music education in Essex: an ethnography of bhangra*. British Journal of Music Education 24 (1): 7-24.

Schreffler, Gibb. 2005a. *The Making of a Dhol... from start to finish....*  
<http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~hcritz/dholpages/dholhome.html> (accessed June 23, 2008).

Schreffler, Gibb. 2005b. *The Performing Communities of Punjab. (A Regional Case Study)*. Paper delivered at the 51st National Conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology in Honolulu, Hawai'i, 19 November, 2006. <http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~hcritz/dholpages/Performingcommunities.html> (accessed June 23, 2008).

Schreffler, Gibb. 2002-4. *Dhol. King of the Punjabi Instruments (an introduction)*.  
<http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~hcritz/dholpages/dholhome.html> (accessed June 23, 2008).

Schreffler, Gibb. 2002. *Out of the Dhol Drum. The Rhythmic "System" of Punjabi Bhangra*. Marster's diss., University of California Santa Barbara.